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# One Ring to Rule Them All: Connecting Johann Herder's Romantic Nationalism & Richard Wagner's "The Ring"

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ONE RING TO RULE THEM ALL:  
CONNECTING JOHANN HERDER'S ROMANTIC NATIONALISM &  
RICHARD WAGNER'S "THE RING"

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In the late 18th and early 19th century all over Europe, a seismic shift in European politics and culture was taking place. Primarily disseminated through German philosophers and historians, the ideology of Nationalism, the support of one's nation and people, emerged and slowly became incredibly influential. Johann Gottfried von Herder, a German philosopher and historian whose ideas influenced Hegel and Nietzsche, alongside almost every German thinker who came after him, formed a "Philosophy of Nationalism," based around the idea of the unifying power of language, and the heart of Nationalism being with its people.<sup>1</sup> Herder attached great importance to the concept of "Volksong," which was a term he used to describe the necessity of music and folktales indigenous to specific cultures in inspiring Nationalism in the people of Germany, and other countries and cultures around Europe. Later in his life, Herder created a large collection of folk stories and myths from various European cultures, exemplifying his commitment to representing cultures through their folk roots. Herder's brand of Nationalism was heavily influenced by the traditions of both Christianity and German paganism. Herder also glorified the beauty of landscape and nature, and this results in his brand of Nationalism being of a Romantic flavor. Although today, the term "Nationalism," usually invokes the image of superiority over other nations and cultures, Herder held the steadfast belief that no culture or people was more important than another.<sup>2</sup> Richard Wagner, the great German composer, was heavily influenced by Herder, like many Germans of his time. Wagner, one of the most well known and famous (or infamous) German composers, is best known for his fifteen hour epic opera "The Ring of Nibelung," also known as *The Ring Cycle*, among many other influential works. *The Ring Cycle* wove together Germanic and Norse traditions into one generation

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Reinhold Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1931), 7

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 263.

spanning epic, using the same folktales that inspired thousands of artists and intellectuals to come. It was the Nationalism pioneered by Herder which was one of the primary influences on the thinking at the time, that influenced Wagner during the creation of his magnum opus, the folklore heavy *Ring Cycle*. What could be a better example of "Volksong" than a fifteen hour epic musical telling of Germanic legend? Indeed, the Romantic Nationalism innovated by Johann Gottfried von Herder, including the concept of "Volksong," had a large impact on the content and message of Richard Wagner's work, most primarily exemplified by his opera *The Ring of Nibelung*.

By the end of the 16th century, German Nationalism was at a low point. The damage that Germany had experienced from the Thirty Years War broke down any patriotism that the people of Germany felt in the past. Jumping to the beginning of the 18th century, conditions in Germany had changed little since the Thirty Year War, and what is now modern Germany was comprised of eighteen hundred separate territories of various sizes and forms of government, united only by the powerless name of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> Germany was too fragmented and economically troubled to engage in the colonial enterprises which were enriching the rest of Europe, and even the language was ridiculed and neglected. The nobility and middle classes were experiencing Gallomania<sup>4</sup>, and Konrad Friedrich in *Uber die Erziehung dear Tochter des Mittelstandes* (About Raising a Daughter of the Middle Class), illustrates just how embarrassed and disdainful the upper and middle classes were with speaking their native tongue; "The speaking of German is for the daughters of burghers, for the maids. The little mademoiselle,

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<sup>3</sup> Ergang, *Herder*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Gallomania: obsession with French culture.

however, must know how to say *bon jour* and *bon soir* and *je vous souhaite bonne nuit*.<sup>5</sup> This abandonment of the German language was emblematic of the lack of patriotism and Nationalism in Germany at this time. In a popular German magazine *Der Teutsche Merkur* (The German Mercury) the slogan of the month in June of 1786 was "We No Longer Have a Fatherland,"<sup>6</sup> exemplifying the shame that most Germans felt toward their country. While German sentiment was mostly devoid of National Patriotism, there were several exceptions, including Friedrich Karl von Moser, who published a treatise called *Von Dem Deutchen Nationalgiest*,<sup>7</sup> which was built around the idea of strengthening the power of the empire. Herder himself called Moser "The author of the first German history with a German head and heart."<sup>8</sup> This void of Nationalism lay the stage for a new philosophy to emerge. In the mid 18th century, things started to change. Johann Gottfried von Herder was born in a small town in 1744, in east Prussia.<sup>9</sup> He was an unusually bright and pious boy, and at the age of sixteen, he was taken in by the village pastor, Trescho, as his parents were too poor to feed him, or sate his insatiable appetite for learning. Trescho had a large library filled with works by German authors, and Herder later stated that this early exposure enflamed his Nationalism. After college at the University of Koenigsberg, Herder traveled to France with high expectations, but discovered that under the magnificence and pomp of French culture, there was nothing but empty frivolity.<sup>10</sup> This trip only served to intensify his German Nationalism, and Herder grew decidedly anti-French. After his trip to Paris, Herder grew close with Romantic poet Goethe, and the friendship proved so

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<sup>5</sup> Konrad Friedrich, "Uber die Erziehung dear Tochter des Mittelstandes," *Stendal* (1796): 148, quoted in Ergang, *Herder*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> "Der Teutsche Merkur," *Teutsche Merkur* (1786): 80, quoted in Ergang, *Herder*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Ergang, *Herder*, 67.

beneficial that Goethe would panegyryze him in his autobiography, saying; "The most important event which for me was to have the weightiest consequences was my acquaintance with Herder and the intimate association which followed...there was not a day which was not instructive for me in the most fruitful way. I learned to see poetry from an entirely different angle than I had known it."<sup>11</sup> The impact that Herder had on Goethe would be one of the many ways that Herder influenced the budding nationalism of his homeland. Herder continued to write influential works and teach the next generation of German philosophers, until he died in 1803, having left a mark on his county that would influence many artists and creatives after him, including none other than Richard Wagner.

Richard Wagner was born just ten years after Herder died. He grew up in the city of Leipzig, and was raised by his mother.<sup>12</sup> From a young age, he dreamed of making an epic theatrical drama, but eventually realized that without musical training, he was unlikely to achieve this dream, and so by 1833 he started composing operas, a popular blend of the theatre Wagner loved, and the music that his country did.<sup>13</sup> His first opera, *The Forbidden Love* was produced in 1836.<sup>14</sup> Wagner moved to Riga in 1837, married Minna Planer, and gained experience conducting other peoples operas. By 1839, Wagner and his wife set sail for Paris.<sup>15</sup> It was in Paris that the extravagant lifestyle he had grown accustomed to began to catch up to him. He was pursued by creditors, and had to make a living transcribing popular arias by other artists, something which he detested. Wagner eventually sent his opera *Rienzi* to the Dresden opera,

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<sup>11</sup> Goethe, "The Autobiography of Goethe," quoted in Ergang, *Herder*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> John Runciman, *Richard Wagner: A Short Biography* (United Kingdom: Andrews UK 2010), ebookcentral. proquest.com/lib/psu/detail.action?docID=650499.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

where it was accepted, and opened in 1842.<sup>16</sup> The opera was a massive success, and Wagner soon became a major household name in Germany. During his years in Dresden, Wagner kept busy writing operas such as *Tannhauser* and *Lohengrin*. However, the March revolutions would spring into full force in 1848, and Wagner was orally and literarily outspoken in support of the groups protesting against the autocratic rule of the separate German states, and advocating Pan-Germanism. These revolutionary writings got him into trouble with the government however, and he fled to Zurich in 1849.<sup>17</sup> He was able to live comfortably with the help of his friends, including the composer Franz Lizst. It was in 1853 that he published the words of *The Ring of Nibelung*, which drew the ridicule and ire of fellow musicians, who did not understand his vision, and one professor advocated that he abandon the opera altogether. Wagner would ignore the criticism leveled at his work, and lay the foundation for "The Ring" to be the greatest of all of his operas, including building a new theatre to display his masterwork. Wagner had long dreamed of establishing a festival theatre where great operas could be shown, and his close relationship with King Ludwig of Bavaria meant that his dreams could be realized. Wagner's vision for the theatre was for every seat to have a clear view of the stage, and for the orchestra to be in a pit, so the crowd would not be distracted by their playing, and simply focus on the music.<sup>18</sup> Wagner's opera house was built in Bayreuth, and the first opera to be shown in the new theatre was, of course, Wagner's *The Ring Cycle*.<sup>19</sup> After the opera premiered, an immediate

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

electric frenzy spread across Europe. Both nobility and common people came from near and far to see the performance, and Wagner became more famous than he was before.<sup>20</sup>

*The Ring Cycle* is a masterpiece of opera. Totalling in at fifteen hours, the cycle is composed of four operas, telling an epic story of gods, monsters, and love. The operas are as follows: *Das Rheingold*, or the Rheingold; *Die Walküre*, or the Valkyrie; *Siegfried*, which refers to the hero of the ring cycle; and *Götterdämmerung*, or twilight of the gods. The first opera, *Das Rheingold*, begins with the dwarf, Alberich, stealing magical gold from mermaids known as the Rhinemaidens. Before he steals the gold, they tell him that whoever uses the gold to make a ring will become incredibly powerful, but they must renounce all love. Alberich forsakes their warnings, and forges himself a ring. The king of the gods, Woton, after learning of the ring, travels to Alberich's kingdom and seizes the ring, the rest of the gold, and captures the dwarf as prisoner. As the god drags Alberich away, he curses the ring so that all who take it are doomed to die.<sup>21</sup> The second opera, *Die Walküre*, covers the life of Siegmund, the son of Woton. Siegmund is in love with a woman named Siegland, who is affianced to another. Siegmund and Siegland

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<sup>20</sup> Leopold Damrosch, a German-American composer and music writer, traveled to see the ring cycle in Bayreuth, and reported in *The New York Sun*, that after the last note of the opera was played, the audience burst into applause and called for Wagner to come to the stage to receive their libations. The Ring had drawn thousands of people to Bayreuth, including two emperors, Pedro II of Brazil and Wilhelm I of Germany. The excitement around the Ring cycle reached every corner of the world, and Author Mark Twain wrote about his experience watching the Ring Cycle in his essay *At the Shrine of St. Wagner*; "You seem to sit with the dead in the gloom of a tomb. You know that they are being stirred to their profoundest depths . . . and times when tears are running down their faces, and it would be a relief to free their pent emotions in sobs or screams; yet you hear not one utterance till . . . the closing strains have slowly faded out and died; then the dead rise with one impulse and shake the building with their applause." Source: "Ecstatic frenzy over Wagner's "Ring Cycle" premieres," National Museum of American History, accessed March 24, 2024, [americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/ecstatic-frenzy-over-wagners-ring-cycle-premieres](https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/ecstatic-frenzy-over-wagners-ring-cycle-premieres).

<sup>21</sup> "A Beginner's Guide to Wagner's Ring Cycle," *Lyric Lately*, Chicago Opera. Published October 17, 2019. [lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/beginners-guide-wagner-ring-cycle](https://lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/beginners-guide-wagner-ring-cycle).



discover however, that they are twins, separated at birth! The incest scandalizes the gods, and Woton determines that Siegmund must die in his upcoming duel for Sieglund's hand. Brünnhilde, Woton's daughter, is sent to make sure this happens, but is so moved by Siegmund's bravery that she decides to save him. However, Woton shatters his son's sword in the battle, and Siegmund dies. Brünnhilde is able to escape with Sieglund, but while Sieglund escapes into the woods, Brünnhilde is caught by Woton and is imprisoned atop a mountain, inside a ring of fire.<sup>22</sup> The third opera, entitled *Siegfried*, introduces us finally to our titular hero. Sieglund has died during childbirth. Her son with Siegmund, Siegfried, is raised by Mime, the brother of the dwarf Alberich. He plans to raise him to become a hero, send him on a quest to get the ring, and once Siegfried has brought the ring back to him, he will kill Siegfried. Siegfried sets off to steal the ring from a dragon. With the ring secured, Alberich and Mime appear to take it, but Siegfried has figured out the plot, and slays Mime. Siegfried learns of a maiden asleep atop a mountain, and promptly sets off to find her. Siegfried climbs the mountain, and is able to reach Brünnhilde. He kisses her, and she wakes up, and promises her love to him, renouncing her immortality.<sup>23</sup> The last opera, *Götterdämmerung*, begins with Hagen, son of Alberich, is plotting on how to steal the ring to enrich his bosses Gutrune and Gunther. Hagen plans to give love potion to Siegfried to wipe his memory and have him forget Brünnhilde so Gutrune can marry him, and Gunther can marry Brünnhilde. Gunther invites Siegfried and Brünnhilde to his castle as guests, but secretly gives Siegfried the potion. Under the effects of the potion, Siegfried captures Brünnhilde and brings her to be married. Brünnhilde is crazed with fury, and when Hagen offers to kill him, she tells him of Siegfried's vulnerable spot on his back. Hagen kills Siegfried with his spear.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

Brünnhilde orders a funeral pyre to be built for Siegfried. Once he is placed on the pyre, Brünnhilde takes the ring and joins her husband on the pyre. The Rhinemaidens reclaim the gold of the ring, and the kingdom of the gods burns in the flames of the pyre.<sup>24</sup> Before this piece of opera was written, Johann Herder was influencing German National thought in ways that would lay the stage for the Romantic era in which *The Ring Cycle* flourished.

Johann Gottfried von Herder had a massive impact on early national thought, and one of his most important contributions was that of the concept of "Volksong," which would guide the doctrine of Romantic Nationalism for centuries to come. "Volksong," which translates to "Folksong," was Herder putting a name to the traditional ways which people loved their culture and country. Herder declared in *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte de Menschheit*; "Patriotism and Enlightenment are the two poles round which all the moral culture of mankind revolves,"<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> One way that "The Ring" covertly inspirers nationalism is though the actual experience of watching the opera. Nationalism is the heritage of common experiences. From the start of the opera to the ending ovation, the entire audience is experiencing the same thing, a common experience that leaves everyone with a similar impression. A comparison would be watching one's country in the Olympics. Everyone leaves behind whatever misgivings they may have about politics, and cheers for their nation. The Ring cycle was like the Olympics of opera, and after witnessing a feat of German excellence, there is no doubt that German audience members would be filled with patriotic pride after seeing one of their own create such a work of art. Herder's Philosophy of Nationalism placed emphasis on folktales and music of the common people inspiring Nationalism; and though the art of group experience, Wagner took folktales and spun them into something that his countrymen could feel very proud of. Source: Dr. Andrew Wackerfuss, "Richard Wagner and the Music of Nationalism," *BLHS 109: The Nineteenth Century Blog*, October 16, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Johann Herder, "Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte de Menschheit" *Sammtliche Werke XIV*: 121, quoted in Carlton Hayes. "Contributions of Herder to the Doctrine of Nationalism." *The American Historical Review* 32, no. 4 (1927): 721. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1837852>.

showing that Herder never advocated for a blind, violent, love of country, but one that was learned and culturally based. In fact, Herder deplored European imperialism as it forcibly stifled the culture of others, and Herder strongly believed that all cultures were of equal importance.<sup>26</sup> While Herder placed all nations on an equal playing field, most of his literature concerned his home country of Germany. Herder constantly praised the beauty of his own country; in a letter to his future wife, he says, "I am now in the country, in the most beautiful, the most rugged, the most German, the most romantic region of the world.....The soul is nevertheless disposed by the daring singular demeanor of this Germany to believe that there is a beautiful, rugged German nature"<sup>27</sup> This nature centered love of Germany is one of the characteristics which makes Herder's Nationalism Romantic in nature.

Romantic Nationalism is a type of Nationalism which centers the beauty of a country, the individuality of its people, and the importance of culture.<sup>28</sup> Herder determined that a people was something basic and definite, there was no robust Nationalism without a robust people to love their country. Another way Herder defied modern stereotypes of nationalism was his constant critiques of Germany's leaders. Herder was in favor of a unified Germany, and to king of Prussia, Frederick II, he was no friend, criticizing the king on his homeland policy concerning Germany's fractured state.<sup>29</sup> His ideas around "Volksong" were eagerly lapped up by the German public, as there was a significant void of Nationalistic thought.<sup>30</sup> The outstanding contributions of Herder

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 724.

<sup>27</sup> Herder, "Letter to Caroline Flachsland" *Erinnerungen vol 1* (1772): 221, quoted in *Ergang, Herder*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, 98, 192-5.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, 63.

<sup>30</sup> "Nationalism." Grove Music Online, Richard Taruskin. *Oxford University Press*. (New York, USA, 2001). Accessed 24 Mar. 2024, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000050846>.

provided a storehouse from which future National philosophers could draw. His first publication to become enormously popular was "Treatise on the Origin of Language," which established his influential ideas around language. Herder proposed that each language exhibited unique values and ideas that provided a positive impact on world culture, and therefore no language or community could be seen as superior than another. From this, the idea of authenticity to one's language and culture was born.<sup>31</sup> This document provided a strong opposition to the rampant Gallomania infecting Germany at the time, and German culture began to shift to include elements of "Volkstümlichkeit" or, folksiness, in which more value was placed on cultural folklore and the artistic appropriation of that folklore.<sup>32</sup> An example of one of the many influential people over whom Herder exerted influence, is the romantic poet Goethe. Goethe was, like many Germans, upset over the void of patriotism found in his country. He writes in a review of Sonnenfels's *Ueber die Liebe des Vaterlandes*, "Have we a fatherland? If we can find a place in the world where we can rest with our possessions, a field to sustain us, a house to cover us, have we not a fatherland? And do not thousands and thousands have that in every state?...Why then this striving for a feeling which we neither can have nor wish to have...?"<sup>33</sup> After his year spent with Herder, he helped to popularize Romantic Nationalism by incorporating folkloric elements in his writings, inspiring other artists and composers, and Wagner was no exception, as he owned forty volumes of Goethe's poetry.<sup>34</sup> Herder's importance and impact cannot be overstated, as it

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<sup>31</sup> "Chapter 3 Volkstümlichkeit." In *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, Richard Taruskin. *Oxford University Press*. (New York, USA, n.d.). Retrieved 1 Oct. 2023, <https://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-003008.xml>.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Goethe, "Sammtliche Werke" *Frankfurter gelehrte Anzeigen vol xxxvi* (1772): 67, quoted in *Ergang, Herder*, 32

<sup>34</sup> L. J. Rather, *Reading Wagner*, 8

was primarily his writings which allowed Romantic Nationalism to sweep across Europe as swift as a babbling "German" brook, like the ones Herder so extolled and loved.

Johann Gottfried Herder was a huge proponent of music, and its power to deliver national sentiment. He said in his essay "Volkslieder" (Folksongs); "When they create poetry, it immediately turns to song: this folkloric proof that, among preliterate peoples, it is impossible to separate poetry and music."<sup>35</sup> Here, Herder is referring to the brilliant songs of the common people. Since Herder believed that Nationalism must be spread by those in the common class, not simply preached from the ivory towers of the educated elite, the folksongs that commoners sang were heavily endorsed and advocated by Herder. Essentially, the fairytale songs sung by mothers to their children before bed would spread a love of country much more effectively than an academic essay circulated in journals which never would touch the hands of those working in the fields. Herder himself came from an extremely poor upbringing, and understood firsthand the wide divide between the ideas advocated by the elites, and the ideas of those living in tiny, poverty ridden villages like the one he grew up in. Herder placed great importance in preserving the oral traditions where he believed the heart of Romantic Nationalism lived; "There remains only one task left for us, as well as protecting those assumed to be of the least value: we must seek and collect the remaining folk songs that are still alive or survive from an earlier time in which they could still be understood and were vital. Perhaps that too would catch a spark from the spirit of the German fatherland, albeit buried in ash and rubble."<sup>36</sup> Here, Herder assigns the

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<sup>35</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder. "Volkslieder and Stimmen der Volker in Liedern" In *Song Loves the Masses : Herder on Music and Nationalism. Herder*, trans. Philip V. Bohlman. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 65.

<sup>36</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder. "Alte Volkslieder," in *Song Loves the Masses : Herder on Music and Nationalism. Herder*, trans. Philip V. Bohlman. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 28.

utmost importance to igniting German patriotism through recording the folktales and songs in which the flame still flickered.

One of Herder's major career accomplishments was collecting a compendium much like the one he advocates in this excerpt.<sup>37</sup> By writing down oral traditions, Herder was ensuring that the vibrant stories passed down over the centuries in small villages would be preserved, and circulated beyond the scope of the communities they originated in. Herder once again recognized the great importance of a grassroots type campaign for Nationalism. Due to his humble upbringings, Herder was more down to earth than his academic peers with his philosophy of Nationalism. Herder knew that in order for patriotism to flourish in Germany, it must start at the bottom of society. While Herder placed importance on traditional spoken folklore, he also stressed music as the most effective vehicle of nationalism for the masses. "Song loves the masses, it loves to take shape from the common voice of the multitude: song commands the ear of the listener and the chorus of voices and souls."<sup>38</sup> Herder believed that it was through song and music specifically that common people could have a voice, and could take their feelings and imbue them with such power that no one could ignore them. The "masses" could take a simple idea and weave it into music-which would serve as a vehicle for the idea to be spread. If the common people knit love of their country into songs, then the idea would spread with ease, and their love would be carried to villages everywhere, thus Nationalism would be spread all across Germany. Johann Herder was a man from a simple background, and his connection with his

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<sup>37</sup> His enormous comparative anthology of folksongs from all countries, *Stimmen der Völker* ('Voices of the Peoples', two vols., 1778–9) - "Nationalism." Grove Music Online, Richard Taruskin.

<sup>38</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder. "*Volkslieder and Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*" In *Song Loves the Masses : Herder on Music and Nationalism. Herder*, trans. Philip V. Bohlman. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 50.

roots was imbued in much of his writings. Herder wanted people to love their country and cherish their culture, and he thought that the best way to inspire this love was through folk song and music made by common people.

Richard Wagner was born into the era that Johann Herder left his mark on. The Nationalistic fervor that was sweeping the continent at the time most certainly ensnared Wagner alongside his peers. Wagner was in a community of Romantic composers known as the New German School, and the dominant trait of Romanticism at this time was a deep love of country.<sup>39</sup> Indeed some of Wagner's prose from his diary about the love he had for his fatherland is very Romantic in nature. "Can something still come of this German nation? Are the seeds really present, I wonder? My heart told me what noble, quite incomparably beautiful things must come one it, if it became the uniquely right thing...Now it is me no one grasps: I am the most German being, I am the German spirit."<sup>40</sup> Here, Wagner's writing is reminiscent of Herder's way of viewing Germany. The boyish hope for his country's future jumps out, and this earnest love underscores the Romanticism that Wagner is imbued in. His assertion of himself as the "German spirit" speaks to the individualism to which Nationalism so heartedly endorses, and at the same time ties back to the importance of "the masses" that comes from "Herder-derived" nationalism.<sup>41</sup> Wagner, like Herder, did not have the most privileged upbringing, and was raised by his mother. Wagner recognized that the German spirit lay with the German people, and was not simply an academic theory but the living, breathing patriotism of Germans. Another exemplar of Wagner's personal nationalism was his involvement in the revolution taking place in

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<sup>39</sup> "Nationalism." Grove Music Online, Richard Taruskin.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Wagner, *The Diary of Richard Wagner 1865-1882: The Brown Book*, ed. Joachim Bergfeld, trans. George Bird. (New York: Cambridge University Press, NY, 1980), 73.

<sup>41</sup> Frank B. Josseland "Richard Wagner and German Nationalism." *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (1962): 223, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42866855>.

Germany. The revolutions of 1849 were caused by waves of Romantic Nationalism that spread across Europe. Most countries, including Germany were fractured into hundreds of states, ruled by the monarchy.<sup>42</sup> These revolutions strove to create unified countries, and to remove the monarchy. Richard Wagner became involved with the revolutions in a major way by writing pamphlets, rousing support, and even becoming involved in the fighting himself. After the revolution in Dresden failed, a warrant was issued for his arrest, and he had to flee the country.<sup>43</sup> His involvement with the revolution showed his ardent nationalism, and the lengths he was willing to go to support his beliefs. Richard Wagner was a man committed to what he believed in. Wagner wrote the Ring Cycle over the course of twenty-six years.<sup>44</sup> The cycle was derived from Germanic and Norse history and legend. The Nibelungen legend is a historical behemoth, with historic elements borrowed from the 4th to 11th century. For example, the 436 event of Gunther of Burgundy succumbing to Agetius is replicated in *The Ring*, where Helm-Gunnar of God-thiod is killed by Agnar before the magic sleep of Brynhild.<sup>45</sup> There are a plethora of historical parallels in the Opera, and Wagner's immortalizing of centuries old German history and Norse myths in his operas was his way of preserving the stories for years to come. His recording of this history and folklore is reminiscent of the folklore composite which Herder dedicated himself to. Wagner was incredibly meticulous in writing his opera. He owned many books on Norse, German, Irish, and Dutch legends and folktales. His Dresden Library contained four editions of the German Nibelungenlied,<sup>46</sup> the legend he drew the most inspiration from for

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<sup>42</sup> Ergang, *Herder*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Runciman, *Richard Wagner*.

<sup>44</sup> Runciman, *Richard Wagner*.

<sup>45</sup> Gudmund Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 20, no. 3 (1921): 293. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27702587>.

<sup>46</sup> L. J. Rather, *Reading Wagner: A Study in the History of Ideas*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 6



his operas. This dedication shows the true passion he had for both recording German mythos and history. According to Danish philologist and folklore scholar Gudmund Schütte, Wagner takes the character of Siegfried, and transforms him into modern Nationalistic German hero.<sup>47</sup> Siegfried is a character that is easy to root for. He fights for what he believes in, and is an underdog type. Giants, gods, and monsters all try to kill him, and yet he perseveres. Up to a point. His final death is utterly tragic and noble, and audiences get to see the rise and fall of Siegfried. The archetypal hero's journey is reflected in his character; he rises against all odds, and his ultimate defeat has incredible ramifications which show just how important he was to the world of the gods. Western music scholar Richard Taruskin takes it one step further by describing Wagner's Opera as, "a radiantly positive expression of utopian ethnic nationalism."<sup>48</sup> All of these elements of *The Ring* make a "Volksong." Wagner took Germanic history and legend and weaved it into a massively popular opera series. Much like Herder collected oral folktales from different cultures and preserved them in written form, Wagner took mythos and history at risk of being relegated to dusty history books and academic papers only read by the elite, and made it accessible to thousands of people who would have not come across it another way. The detail oriented way in which Wagner preserved these histories, and the fact that he did it at all, shows the genuine passion that he had for his work. In many ways, Wagner furthered Herder's legacy and vision through his work. He took folktales and ingrained them deeper into German culture through music. His exaltation of German music in the following could have come from Herder himself; "I have often explained how I held music to be the saving good

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<sup>47</sup> Gudmund Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis." 291.

<sup>48</sup> "Nationalism." Grove Music Online, Richard Taruskin.

genius of the German people...German music was a holy emanation of the human spirit."<sup>49</sup>

Homages to Herder's work are present in Wagner's writing and music, examples being the prominent use of folktales in *The Ring*, and his political action in favor of a unified Germany.

The fact that books authored by Herder are some of the 400 novels in his Dresden library proves that it would be no stretch to say that Wagner's German Nationalism was affected greatly by Herder's.<sup>50</sup>

One would be remiss to talk about the nationalism of Richard Wagner, and gloss over his antisemitism and xenophobia. Indeed, aside from his operas he may be best known for his hateful prejudices. Near the end of Wagner's life, he became more and more antisemitic, and wrote a conspiracy ridden treatise called "Judaism in Music," in which Wagner points at Jewish composers and musicians "infiltrating" musical spaces where they did not belong, and commercializing the music scene.<sup>51</sup> The legacy of this essay is incredibly troubling when considering Adolf Hitler's love of Wagner. Wagner was also not shy about his Xenophobia, and degraded Romani music.<sup>52</sup> These hateful attitudes contrasted Johann Herder's principles of Nationalism, one of which was that each culture and country were equally important in what they brought to the global table.<sup>53</sup> The Romantic Nationalism which Herder pioneered was centered around language, learning, and folktale, and was not concerned with elevating one culture over another. These unfortunate and hateful parts of Wagner's nationalism cannot be ignored, as they had just as big of an impact on his legacy as the beautiful operas Wagner composed. Wagner is

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Wagner, "Offenes Schreiben an Herrn Friedrich Schon in Worms," *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (1882): 292, quoted in L. J. Rather, *Reading Wagner: A Study in the History of Ideas*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 196

<sup>50</sup> L. J. Rather, *Reading Wagner*, 6

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, 161.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Wagner, *The Diary of Richard Wagner*, 43-4.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Nineteenth Century*.

an incredibly fraught and complicated character, whose enduring legacy is just as messy as he was in life.

Throughout his long academic career, Johann Gottfried Herder drew attention to the dearth of patriotism in Germany. Herder provided a succinct model through his writings for his fellow Germans to embrace their country. Herder's influence was far reaching, and inspired a new generation of German writers and creatives, such as Goethe and Friedrich Nietzsche. Nationalism was an incredibly influential philosophy, and over the years has changed and morphed into what it is now. While the term "Nationalism" brings to mind something more violent and extreme today, the Romantic Nationalism Herder innovated was one which held every culture as equally important. The wave of Romantic Nationalism in the 18th and 19th century had a mammoth impact on music. Almost every European composer of note in this era was inspired by Herder's ideas, not the least of which was Richard Wagner. While the case study for this essay was Wagner and his *Ring of Nibelung*, Herder's ideas of Romantic Nationalism were far reaching and pervasive. Wagner's friend Franz Liszt, and Czech composer Bedřich Smetana are some examples of the influence Herder had, with Smetana writing an opera cycle extolling the virtues of his homeland.<sup>54</sup> This paper would not have been possible without several important sources, including "Song: Loves the Masses", a compilation of Herder's writing on the importance of folk music and nationalism. "Herder and the foundations of German Nationalism," was an important text that informed the early history of Germany before Herder's ideas took off. Wagner's diary from the end of his life, immortalized in "The Brown Book" was helpful in understanding Wagner's personal ideas surrounding nationalism - and his Xenophobia. "Reading

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<sup>54</sup>" Romantic Nationalism in Music." Active Minds. Accessed October 1, 2023. [https://www.activeminds.com/topics/Romantic\\_Nationalism.html](https://www.activeminds.com/topics/Romantic_Nationalism.html).

Wagner: A study in the history of ideas" helped to inform the connection between Herder and Wagner. The link between the ideas of Herder and the operas of Wagner runs deep. In his final triumph of opera, Wagner blended music, legend, and Romantic Nationalism together in a way that preserves oral and historical traditions for centuries to come. In many ways, Wagner's monumental *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is the ultimate example of Herder's "Volksong."

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